

Highfield Road Uniting Church

Mark 5: 21 – 43 Your Faith Has Made You Whole

Gospel stories, indeed all scripture stories, are like faceted gems. There are so many ways to approach them, so many facets to look at and through.



Today's extract from Mark's Gospel demonstrates this especially clearly. Mark has given us two separate stories of the power of Jesus to heal and to bring life, but he has also woven these two stories together. Through this weaving, he shows connecting points and contrasting points and symbolic aspects that open so many ways to get meaning: meaning about Jesus, about the Kingdom, about healing and about salvation.

You could examine the facet which shows us the two separate stories, and each story certainly has individual aspects that are interesting. However, if taken on their own, they present difficult questions: "Have I enough faith to be healed?" or "Why did Jesus let the little girl die?"

So, let's examine a different facet: one which shows how Mark has deliberately woven these two stories together. What do they have in common? Why did Mark put them together?

Both stories feature women.

Both women are called daughters.

Both are drained of life.

Both are ritually unclean.

Both are brought to life and wholeness through touch.

And, most importantly,

Both stories are about who Jesus is.

The fact that both stories feature women who are daughters, drained of life and ritually unclean is important for inclusivity. However, what is more important is what the stories declare about Jesus' mission to institute God's kingdom. This mission is not about military conquest, politics, religious culture or being right according to the law. Jesus is about wholeness, life, compassion, and real people struggling with simply living. The pictures that Mark builds in these two little stories are poignant, real slices of life. The stuff that inspires artists:





What we see here isn't the great prophet striding through the marketplace dispensing impersonal healing through the touching of his clothes or being touched by his shadow. This is a caring Saviour who stops and seeks to know the person who has sought healing. This isn't the authoritative, remote prophet from other stories who commands healing at a distance. This is the caring Saviour who comes, touches and guides the little girl to restored life and family. Here is God with us. Just as Jesus was with the disciples in the boat, here he is with real people in their daily struggles. The kingdom of God, the rule of love and life, is close at hand.

A different facet shows us how Mark also highlights contrasts between the two stories through the way he has connected them.

The woman is an outcast, one of the many disconnected from faith, worship and community by the law.

The girl, while also a female, is a member of upper society.

The woman, probably divorced given her condition, must fight for herself.

The girl has a man to take up her cause and plead for her.

The woman was in effect congratulated for her faith.

The girl received grace, with no expectation of faith.

The woman is healed.

The girl is raised from death.

There is no formula or magic ritual for healing. Through these connected stories, Mark is introducing us to the gracious, hope-filled and yet unpredictable nature of God's blessing. The stories of the woman and the girl could not be more different, and yet both received God's gift of life in Jesus Christ. It's not a matter of having enough faith, or praying the right way, or having a powerful intercessor. Healing, whatever form it takes, is still in the hands of God. It's about faith, hope and love and not about formula and certainty.

For those sensitive to subtleties of language, there is yet another facet through which to view these stories. In blending them together, Mark has imbedded some symbolism and words that are common and yet deeply theological. In both stories, the symbolic number 12 is prominent. Twelve is Israel's number. So Mark has connected two stories as a means to say that the Kingdom, which Jesus says is drawing near, is not abandoning Israel, but is coming to save Israel. The law in Israel has created an underclass of outcasts, but there is also a law-abiding Israel that sees itself abandoned by God to the Romans, an Israel that thinks Jesus is just a teacher, and faith is just about what you can get out of it. God's new Kingdom, in and around Jesus, is about restoring the outcasts - those real people of Israel who have been made second class citizens through uncompassionate legalism - and also about bringing new life to an Israel that is dead. Mark has the

synagogue leader describe his daughter as being at the end of her days, a phrase which is used in describing the end times when God will put all things right. It is unfortunate that we don't see it directly in English, but Mark also used a word for the little girl coming back to life that he only uses in one other context – Jesus coming back to life. These two stories can therefore be seen as a little potted Gospel: the teacher goes about healing and reclaiming the outcasts and then, in the very face of doubt and derision, challenges and undoes death itself.

I read a lot for this sermon and struggled to find the one key point to present as the good news today. I struggled because there were so many points of good news. Good news about Jesus and compassion; good news about God inclusively gathering all the people; good news about God's triumph even over death; and good news about faith and hope. It all depends on which facet of the story you look through. Each provides a different perspective, and each offers good news. And the best news, I think, is the many facets themselves. Knowing that there are differing facets relieves each single facet of the pressure of conveying the whole truth and the whole story. Recognising the contribution of each facet helps to bind the community together by acknowledging that we are different and yet all welcome in the grace and faith of Jesus Christ.